KEY POINTS:
Home care nurses play a pivotal role in the care of patients with terminal illness. They support abilities and ease distress of patients & caregivers to meet their goals while avoiding crisis in the home. Many factors impact when and how often nurses should visit:

- How well-managed symptoms are
- How quickly the client’s functions are changing
- How acute, changeable and predictable the patient’s condition is
- How well the patient and his/her family are coping
- Whether or not there are clear goals of care and current care plans
- Risk of health crisis
- Capacity of home care nursing services

The authors refined a visual guide that uses these factors to assess overall level of risk: the higher the risk, the sooner the nursing visit should be.

BACKGROUND:
People living with terminal illness spend most of their time at home and home care nurses play a pivotal role in their care. Deciding when to visit, however, is not straightforward. Patient’s conditions can change rapidly; symptoms that are uncontrolled can cause distress and caregivers can become overburdened.

WHAT IS THE NEED?
Planning the next home care nursing visit is a necessary competency in order to meet the needs and goals of palliative patients and their families. No tools have existed to provide novice clinicians with specific guidance.

WHAT DID THEY DO ABOUT IT?
Palliative clinical nurse specialists and university researchers conducted a qualitative research study to better understand the factors that nurses consider to time the next home visit. A team of palliative care clinicians and expert home care nurses then used this knowledge to refine a previously-developed guide to create an easy-to-use, evidence-informed visual guide: Palliative care: Determining the next home care nurse visit.

DESCRIPTION OF RESULTS:
The visual guide assists with scheduling the next visit to ensure that effective care is delivered and that decision-making by different practitioners is consistent. Using this guide helps to assess the likelihood of health risks, and therefore how soon the next home visit should be. Six assessment factors are considered:

1. How well patient symptoms are managed
2. Transition in Palliative performance scale (PPS)
3. Client and family needs and coping ability
4. Capacity of caregivers, including knowledge, skill and willingness
5. Variability of condition, including predictability, stability and acuity
6. Existence of clear goals of care and a current plan of care

Based on these factors, the clinician applies filter questions to make a judgment, then negotiates with the patient, family and the home care office nurse to finalize the timing of the next visit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE:
This guide is currently used in all Fraser Health Authority Home Healthcare sites to prioritize visits, to educate novice clinicians and to support visit decisions. Evaluation and quality-improvement is underway.